DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 162 733 PS 010 212

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TITLE SPAN Playgroups for Geographically Isolated Pre-School Children: Theoretical Basis and Strategies.
INSTITUTION Queensland Dept. of Education, Brisbane (Australia).
PUB DATE 76
NOTE 20p.; No. 5 in a series on the evaluation of the Queensland Pre-School Correspondence Program

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.83 HC-$1.67 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Literature Reviews; *Parent Participation; *Peer Groups; *Preschool Children; Preschool Education; *Pretend Play; *Rural Education; Social Development; Social Isolation
IDENTIFIERS *SPAN Playgroups

ABSTRACT

This report reviews research related to effects of the amount and quality of early peer group interaction on the social and cognitive development of young children and briefly describes a preschool playgroup program for geographically isolated Australian families. Research suggests that children from isolated rural areas may perform more poorly academically and socially partly because of lack of a readily accessible peer group with whom to engage in sociodramatic play. To further facilitate their children's development, parents of children enrolled in a preschool correspondence program are encouraged to form playgroups with other parents of preschool children in their area. Child-centered and parent-centered objectives of the preschool playgroups are listed. Directions for program support activities are suggested. (Author/RH)

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No. 5 in a series on the evaluation
of the Queensland Pre-School Correspondence Program

SPAN PLAYGROUPS FOR GEOGRAPHICALLY ISOLATED PRE-SCHOOL CHILDREN: THEORETICAL BASIS AND STRATEGIES

A PARENT SELF–HELP PROGRAM TO AID THE SOCIAL AND INTELLECTUAL DEVELOPMENT OF QUEENSLAND PRE–SCHOOL CHILDREN LIVING IN GEOGRAPHICALLY ISOLATED AREAS – A PROBLEM AND A STRATEGY.

PS010212

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1976

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ABSTRACT

Based on evidence from studies of peer deprivation and of social and language development in the pre-school years, this paper draws three conclusions with respect to geographically isolated children. First, that the provision of opportunities for social interaction is essential to the development of the child during the pre-school years; second, the utility of playgroups, run by parents, to fulfill this need – corollary is also discussed: the advantage which should accrue to parents in their role as teachers of the Pre-School Correspondence Program through involvement in these SPAN playgroups – and third, SPAN Parent Workshops are presented as a strategy to fulfill the aim of providing a peer group for geographically isolated pre-school children, leading to the formation of playgroups and facilitating the development of parents as educators.

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INTRODUCTION

It is a matter of history that the needs of geographically isolated children in Australia have taken second place to those of their urban counterparts. In part this has undoubtedly been due to the costs involved in providing educational and other services to remote areas (Jerco & Whiteman, 1968). Although the rural child has also been a subject largely ignored by researchers, the little research that has been undertaken suggests that, as a group, children educated in rural communities do not achieve academically as well as their urban peers (Cambourne, 1971a; Campbell, 1962; Queensland Department of Education, 1969). Changes in the balance of the Australian economy with a marked and increasing de-emphasis on the rural sector, causing and coupled with the urban drift (O'Brien, 1971), make the implications of this finding more serious. Additionally, the technological shift to capital intensive farming has not only accelerated the urban drift, but has created a growing need for expertise in rural areas. A need has arisen, therefore, to redress the imbalance in educational opportunities between rural and urban areas.

PRE–SCHOOL EDUCATION

The development of pre-school education as a foundation for later education and life can be seen as an outgrowth of the rejection of the conception of intelligence as a fixed and immutable inheritance – an anatomic process of maturation. According to this early view of intelligence, it was believed that the child should be left alone to develop naturally. However, dissonant evidence from studies of identical twins, where it was found that the correlation between IQs of identical twins reared apart is lower than that of those reared together, pointed to the importance of environment as a vital factor in the development of intelligence and ability. That the rate of development of the child depends on the nature of his encounters with the environment is supported by the findings of Dennis on the retarding effects of relatively unchanging stimulation and lack of opportunity for behavioural interaction with the environment in poorly staffed orphanages (Mc V. Hunt, 1961). The study of Skeels and Dye (Deutsch, Katz & Jensen, 1968) showed that babies transferred from an orphanage with little individual care and attention to a school for the feeble minded where they were given almost individual care and attention by older female inmates, experienced an average gain of 27 IQ points for the total group after two years time. The control group which remained in the institution showed a decrease of 26 IQ points, evidencing that differential amounts of environmental stimulation are correlated with significant changes in infant IQ scores.

Piaget (1947) and Hebb (1949) suggest that early experience may be of crucial importance in determining both the rate of development and final level of ability of the child, and as the change in the intellectual structures of the brain is most rapid during the early months and years of the child's life, this suggests that the effects of environmental encounters during the early period of life should perhaps be most potent (Mc V. Hunt, 1961). The longitudinal studies of human development by Bloom (1964) have provided a basis for the belief that the longer a young organism lives under the given kind of circumstances, the harder it is to alter this influence. If IQ at age 17 is taken as the criterion for intelligence, '. . by about age four, 50% of the variation in intelligence at age 17 is accounted for' and '80% by about age eight', (Bloom 1964, p.68), highlighting the importance of the pre-school years, and the provision of a stimulating environment for young children.

Although the young child's spontaneous play has been regarded as nature's way of imparting knowledge to the child since the time of Froebel and Pestalozzi (Almy, 1969) the work of Anna Freud (Almy, 1969) and Erik Erikson (1950) suggested that if spontaneous play occurred in a stimulating environment it would aid the child's social, emotional and cognitive development. The advance towards new stages of mastery through play, proposed by Erikson, is described as proceeding

> 'along two fronts, one related to association with peers, the other to the use of toys and equipment. Along both, the child, in a sense, moves out of himself and confronts reality more effectively.' [1]
>
> (quoted in Almy, 1969, p.271)

Such studies, combined with the changing view of intelligence as a fixed inheritance, resulted in pre-school education which contained a balance of structured and spontaneous play, being instituted throughout most Western countries.

PRE–SCHOOL EDUCATION FOR THE CHILD IN GEOGRAPHICAL ISOLATION

Provision of pre-school education for rural children living in isolated areas reflects a recognition of the changing needs of the rural population, and the need for greater educational opportunities for rural children.

The Pre-School Correspondence Program[2] introduced in Queensland in 1974 was designed to enrich the early environment of rural isolated pre-school children, and to provide help for these children in developing those skills which are thought to be important to the child's future education, such as language facility and its associated skills, concept formation and problem solving and the ability to think imaginatively. The Pre-School Correspondence Program is at present being evaluated to ensure that the program is meeting the needs of the rural child living in isolated areas which it serves.[3] There is, however, one important aspect of the child's total development that cannot be met adequately by a correspondence program, namely facilitation of the child's social development through interaction with age peers.

SOCIALISATION AND AGE PEERS

The rural child living in isolated areas has sufficient contact with parents and siblings to become socialised in the sense

> 'that he develops from a helpless infant into a competent member of his social community with the fundamental human attributes of speech, social communication, self-reflection and consciousness.' (Richards, 1974, p.1)

The degree of competence developed may vary, however, and it may be that the isolated child's environment is not conducive to the full development of his social potential. Teachers' and headmasters' reports of children from isolated farms in Britain, show that these children due to shyness and withdrawal take up to half a term to settle into their first year at school, compared to an average of three days for children from the same population with previous playgroup experience. (Department of Education and Science, London, 1975). Parents' comments to

Queensland pre-school correspondence teachers support this finding, where excessive shyness of isolated children on meeting peers is reported.[4]

Although the child psychology literature contains no reports of children who have otherwise led a normal life but who have been completely deprived of contact with peers, related evidence suggests that such contact may be very important to the child's total development. Harlow and Harlow's comparative research (1970) using rhesus monkeys, evidences that absence of contact with peers during the first year of life affects development of the ability later needed for effective social relations, even though the animal is reared with its natural mother. Similarly, the Harlow studies have shown that contact with peers plays a compensatory role in social development when contact with a mother-figure is lacking. Such infant monkeys later show adequate social development.

Although application of results from animal studies to the human condition should be treated with caution, Freud and Dann (1951) found that a group of three to four year old Jewish children orphaned during the Second World War managed to learn a new language and adjust to life in a new country, despite a very disturbed history of being shifted, as a group, from one concentration camp to another. From this study they concluded that the presence of a peer group can offset the lack of a one-to-one adult/child relationship in humans if the peer group is highly significant and supportive to its members. This study, combined with evidence from comparative studies supports the conclusion

> 'that early contact with peers contributes significantly to the social development of the human child.' (Hartup, 1970, p.36)

The work of Piaget suggests that early contact with peers may also be necessary for the development of role-taking ability and consequently the construction of logical thought. According to Piaget, for the child

> 'interaction with his peers in the social give and take of spontaneous play confronts him with the necessity of accommodating himself to their ideas. Presumably since these ideas are not so strikingly different from his own as may be those of adults, adaptation is more readily made to their thought than to the thought of the older person . . . doing things in social collaboration, in a group effort . . . leads to a critical frame of mind, where children must communicate with each other. This is an essential factor of intellectual development.'
> (Piaget, 1964, in Almy, 1969 p.160)

SOCIODRAMATIC PLAY AND SCHOOL SUCCESS

A significant study on pre-school children in Israel has been undertaken by Sarah Smilansky (1968), linking the ability to engage in sociodramatic play with later school achievement, and the ability to solve problems in the public and private world of the adult. An episode of sociodramatic play involves two or more children assuming roles, and the development of a theme during the play interaction. Objects or toys are used either in a real or 'pretend' sense, and make-believe and considerable verbalisation related to the play episode occur.

Smilansky (1968) claims that

> 'sociodramatic play behaviour develops three main areas in a child, all of which are essential parts not only of play, but also of the school game and the game of life.
>
> 1. *Creativity.* Based on utilisation of past experience and controlled by the demands of some framework.
> 2. *Intellectual growth.* Includes power of abstraction, widening of concepts, and acquisition of new knowledge.
> 3. *Social skills.* Positive give and take, tolerance and consideration.'
>
> (Smilansky, 1968, p.12)

Smilansky draws an important distinction between the ability of culturally advantaged[5] and culturally disadvantaged[6] children to engage in sociodramatic play. Culturally advantaged children demonstrate much sociodramatic play during their play activities, while most culturally disadvantaged children do not engage in sociodramatic play at all. As these culturally disadvantaged children possess the level of language ability at which children normally begin to engage in sociodramatic play the lack of sociodramatic play in the disadvantaged group tends to suggest that the relationship between language, role-taking ability and logical operations may depend on more factors than Piaget's sequential theory of development suggests. Smilansky holds that an underlying reason for the lack of sociodramatic play in the disadvantaged group is the relatively low emphasis placed on content and meaning in the adult/child interactions of children from the culturally disadvantaged group.

Smilansky (1968) and Bernstein (1970) characterise the families of the culturally disadvantaged children of their studies as providing a warm and loving environment for the child, however, they do not recognise the child as a person in his own right. Rather, the child is seen as an object of affection and of authoritarian control (Smilansky, 1968), where formal status assigned to the child is based on a power structure (Bernstein, 1970), as the child is not seen to possess his own power of judgement (Smilansky, 1968). He is not person-oriented as the culturally advantaged child is (Bernstein, 1970); instead, he is person-as-object oriented (Smilansky, 1968), a positional role being taken in the family which is relatively fixed. The unique psychological qualities of each person within the family are not recognised (Bernstein, 1970). The child is object-oriented towards the world, and as such shows

> 'an incapacity to undertake roles in play with other children on anything but the simplest and most sporadic basis'. (Smilansky, 1968, p.82)

LANGUAGE FACILITY OF THE RURAL QUEENSLAND CHILD

A study by Cambourne (1971a), focusing on the syntactical structure of the child's verbal interactions, showed that rural Grade 1 Queensland children used syntactically more sophisticated language than their urban peers. Cambourne investigated sentence combining behaviour as it is in his opinion, a 'sensitive index of language maturity', and because 'half of the ten features which Bernstein (1961) claims are characteristic of sentences produced by Restricted Code[7] speakers can be related to underuse of the sentence-combining options available to speakers of English' (Cambourne, 1971 b, p.14).

Therefore, Cambourne's finding that rural first grade children scored higher than their urban peers on the four measures of sentence-combining behaviour he investigated, suggests that the language of these children would more closely resemble that of Bernstein's Elaborated Code [8] speakers than his Restricted Code speakers. This would suggest that the parents of Cambourne's rural children are making conscious efforts to explain to their children the reasons behind any given action, as is the case in Smilansky's advantaged group. Cambourne's sample consisted of 28 children and his findings must be related to the general rural population with some caution. However, as there has been no other Australian research investigating rural/urban differences in sentence-combining behaviour, there is no evidence to either refute or support the notion that the children studied by Cambourne may have been atypical.

FACILITATION OF SOCIODRAMATIC PLAY

Smilansky (1968) wished to investigate the conditions required to significantly change or develop the culturally disadvantaged child's ability to engage in sociodramatic play, using three groups of culturally disadvantaged pre-school aged children, groups A, B and C. Group A was provided with a wide and rich variety of meaningful impressions and experiences related to the play themes used in the three experimental groups. Visits were conducted to clinics and grocery stores and discussions were held in the kindergarten after these visits.

The children of Group B were taught how to engage in and sustain sociodramatic play, but were not provided with the background of meaningful experiences according to Group A. Adults helped the children to use previous experiences, converting their impressions into sociodramatic play. Group C was given a combination of the treatments accorded to Groups A and B. Smilansky found that no significant improvement occurred in the level of sociodramatic play in Group A, but that a highly significant improvement occurred in Groups B and C, with the improvement of Group C being significantly higher than that for Group B. It can be concluded that provision of meaningful experiences alone does not facilitate the development of sociodramatic play, and that facilitating sociodramatic play by direct intervention without provision of a meaningful background of experience is a more successful approach. However, a combination of these two approaches is the most effective strategy.

ROLE–TAKING ABILITY OF CHILDREN LIVING IN GEOGRAPHICAL ISOLATION

In a study undertaken by Hollos and Cowan (1973) nine measures of conservation, classification and role-taking were administered to children in three different social settings in Eastern Norway – a farm community, a village and a town. The primary difference among the three samples was the amount of verbal and social interaction which the children engaged in with adults and peers. In each setting, 48 male and female children – equal numbers of seven, eight and nine year olds – were tested, the seven year olds being pre-schoolers.

Factor analysis revealed that age effects were prominent in logical operations, while setting effects predominated in role-taking. The isolated farm children showed

showed significantly poorer perceptual[9] and conceptual role-taking[10] ability than the village and town children.

The degree of social interaction of the children from isolated farms in this study closely resembles that experienced by the rural Australian child attending a one-teacher school, such as the children in Cambourne's (1971 a) study. Most of the early learning experiences of these Norwegian children takes place in the context of the isolated homestead, with interaction mainly limited to family members. On reaching school age they are bused to a neighbouring school, and as the bus returns them to their homes immediately after school finishes, they have no opportunity for after-school play and free interaction with others.

The Norwegian children appear to live in a less verbal home environment than their Queensland urban and rural counterparts and Hollos and Cowan liken the language used in the farm, village and town homes of Eastern Norway to Bernstein's 'restricted code'. Much non-verbal communication between the Norwegian parents and children is reported, however, and it seems unlikely that the communication throughout culturally homogeneous Eastern Norway lacks underlying meaning, which a strict application of Bernstein's theory would suggest.

Indeed, the authors, after undertaking a detailed anthropological study of the isolated farm sample, concluded that

> 'the deprivation of the children is more apparent than real. The learning environment of these children is far from impoverished. They receive a great deal of social stimulation and support from their mothers, including countless opportunities to observe and imitate . . . Despite the low verbal nature of their social environments, they coped well with tasks which required verbal as well as conceptual sophistication.'
>
> (Hollos & Cowan, 1973, p.639)

It is therefore assumed that both urban and rural children in Queensland and Eastern Norway are receiving the provision of reasons for behaviour and actions, and meaningful experiences which Smilansky (1968) claims are necessary for the full development of sociodramatic play and subsequent school success. Smilansky (1968) states that a *direct* parent influence is the provision of friends for the child with whom he can engage in sociodramatic play. The Queensland and Norwegian children from isolated areas are similar in that they both lack the presence of a readily accessible peer group with whom to engage in sociodramatic play and come into contact with fewer adults than the urban child. Therefore, although no research has been undertaken, it is possible that the Australian child, living in isolated rural areas, is also less proficient in role-taking than his urban peer.

Cambourne (1971 a) attributes the superior sentence-combining ability of the Queensland rural child, compared to the urban child, to the continuing presence of adult language models for the rural child, and the fewer verbal interactions with same age peers who would provide a less sophisticated verbal model. He argues that the rural first grade child attending a one-teacher school is verbally advantaged, as he is exposed to the more sophisticated language models of his teacher and the older children, however, as he progresses through the one-teacher

school, this advantage is partially lost thus explaining the fall off in school attainment of the rural child.

Although Cambourne may be correct in blaming conditions in the one-teacher school for this academic fall off, it is also possible, in the light of Smilansky's (1968) views and Hollos and Cowan's findings (1973), that certain elements of the isolated rural child's total development are lacking, making him less well equipped to succeed in the school system, despite his apparent verbal advantage.

It is our contention that the lack of a readily accessible peer group during the pre-school years and as a consequence fewer opportunities to engage in socio-dramatic play, may result in relatively poor development in the three areas which Smilansky (1968) feels are aided by such play: namely, creativity, intellectual growth and social skills. Although research on rural Australian children from isolated areas is badly needed to test this hypothesis, tentative support for it exists in Hollos and Cowan's (1973) finding that geographically isolated rural Norwegian children have significantly poorer role-taking ability than their urban peers.

It may be argued that parents can engage in sociodramatic play with their child to provide this lacking component, and indeed Smilansky (1968) has shown that adults can facilitate sociodramatic play amongst children who do not normally engage in it by taking part in the play episode of the group. However, it is debatable whether adults could ever take the place of a child's peers in a socio-dramatic play episode. Diversity of roles and sophistication and depth of play themes and associated verbalisation would appear to grow out of sociodramatic interactions between peers (Smilansky, 1968), although Strom (1975) suggests that parents could also be effective players if they were prepared to engage in extensive play themes as an equal partner with the child. However, the child is a better player than the adult ever can be (Strom, 1975) and on the basis of studies which show an increase in child/child interaction and a lessening of adult/child interactions in nursery schools between the ages of four and five (Reuter & Yunik, 1973; Blurton Jones 1972, Raph et al. 1968), it seems reasonable to assume that the child would prefer and be more spontaneously stimulated by the presence of a peer group with which to engage in sociodramatic play. Cambourne (1971) reports that older children tend to dominate younger children in play activities in a playground situation, where the younger child tends to verbalise less, and it is feasible to suggest that an older child would find a younger child frustrating and perhaps even an impediment to his play intentions.

ROLE–TAKING AND ALTRUISM

Role-taking ability would seem to be a prerequisite for the emergence of co-operative and altruistic interaction, and if one does not precede the other, they can at least be regarded as functionally related (Hartup, 1970). Experiences leading to the learning of prosocial acts, such as role-playing helping mother, may also provide the opportunity for development of general tendencies which influence the performance of those acts, such as development of the capacity for empathy (Staub, 1971). It has also been found that nursery school children exposed to an altruistic peer model display significantly more altruism than children not

exposed to such a model (Hartup & Coates, 1970). Social participation has been found to be more highly correlated with nursery school experience than with age, indicating that a pre-school environment where play is a central feature is conducive to improved peer interactions (Smith, 1972), with presumably more opportunities being available for sociodramatic play and its attendant feature, role-playing. Altruism can be regarded as a valuable character trait, and as such, should be fostered by provision of opportunities for peer interaction and associated role-playing activities.

SUMMARY OF RESEARCH

On the basis of studies presented in this paper, it appears that interaction with peers at an early age may be of great significance in the attainment of mature social skills (Harlow & Harlow, 1970; Freud & Dann, 1951; Smilansky, 1968; Hartup, 1970), including the development of altruistic behaviour (Staub, 1971; Hartup & Coates, 1970).

Smilansky's (1968) work with pre-school children in Israel suggests that the ability to engage in sociodramatic play is predictive of school success, while Bernstein (1961 in Cambourne 1971 b) suggests that language facility is also an important factor. Research on Queensland rural children attending one-teacher schools (Cambourne, 1971 a) suggests that at Grade 1 level the language used by these children is more sophisticated than that of their urban peers, but it has been shown that rural Australian primary school children are not achieving as well academically as the urban child.

Hollos and Cowan's (1973) finding that Norwegian isolated rural children have poor role-taking ability, combined with Smilansky's views on the importance of socio-dramatic play to school success, therefore suggest that children from isolated rural areas may perform more poorly academically partly because of lack of a readily accessible peer group with whom to engage in sociodramatic play.

THE PROBLEM

It appears that pre-school children living in geographically isolated areas are disadvantaged through not having peers with whom to play. Providing opportunities for peer interaction is very difficult, however, when the distance between adjoining neighbours may exceed 50 miles.

THE SPAN PROGRAM – A SOLUTION

In order to cater for this need for age peer interaction, the Pre-School Branch of the Queensland Department of Education has adopted the idea of playgroups put forward at the 1974 Conference on Pre-School Education for Isolated Children.[11] On the basis of the experience of the New Zealand Play Centre, and the playgroup movements of Britain, Australia and America (Grey, 1974; Somerset, 1973; McDonald, 1973; Molony, 1967; The Playgroup Association of Queensland; Winn & Porcher, 1967) parents of children enrolled on the Pre-School Correspondence Program are being encouraged to form playgroups with other parents of pre-school children in their area. This extension of the Pre-School Correspondence Program

has been called the SPAN Program, and is a parent initiated program of a 'self-help' nature. SPAN playgroups involve parents with pre-school children from neighbouring areas coming together perhaps twice a week or as seldom as once a month to provide opportunities for play with peers for their children. Play sessions last from two hours to a whole day. Parents provide materials for activities for their children (*Let's Get Started,* Queensland Department of Education), and take the opportunity to discuss common problems related to child development, and the Pre-School Correspondence Program.

SPAN groups are given back up support from the Pre-School Correspondence Unit in the form of activities ideas booklets, tapes (e.g. music and movement) and an issue of basic equipment such as paints and paper. A SPAN library for non-consumable items, such as puzzles and musical instruments, and a Parent Resource Library are being developed.

In its first year of operation, 1975, ten SPAN playgroups were formed throughout Queensland, in places as remote as Wyandra and Cape Flattery. The parents involved in this program have felt that the benefits to their children have been great enough to warrant the expense of travelling often large distances to attend play sessions, despite their current depressed financial position.

CHILD-CENTRED OBJECTIVES OF SPAN PLAYGROUPS

1. To aid the development of social skills through interaction with a wider variety of adults and age peers.
2. To allow the child to engage in a wide range of individual and group activities to foster all aspects of development.
3. To stimulate the child's interest in activities through the presence of other children.
4. To foster a feeling of group membership in the child to aid his social development.
5. To provide same-age children with whom to engage in sociodramatic play and develop co-operative behaviour.
6. To provide a wider variety of adult models for the child to foster language development, especially for those children from homes where English is not predominantly spoken.
7. To increase the rural child's chance of school success through development of sociodramatic play ability and language facility.
8. To invest in the child a sense of personal worth through observing parents interacting co-operatively for the child's benefit.

PARENTS AS TEACHERS

It is anticipated that there will also be a beneficial carry over into the home, with SPAN playgroups providing parents with learning experiences which will make them more effective teachers of their own children. The role which parents perform as their child's first and most influential teachers has been well documented (Levenstein in Schaefer 1972; Gordon 1971; Hess & Shipman, 1965). Intervention programs for disadvantaged children in the United States of America carried out by Levenstein (Schaefer 1972) and Gordon (1971) have shown that gains in IQ caused by such programs, have been greater and longer lasting when the programs have been home-based involving the parents in teaching their children, than when children have attended a centre-based program. Hess and Shipman (1965) have concluded that it is the mother's style of verbal interaction with her child which provides the best predictor for the child's future success in school. Provision of rationales for instruction and giving praise, orientation of the child to the task, and specific feedback for the child constitute a successful style of verbal interation (Streissguth & Bee, 1972). Such studies have concentrated on the mother/child interaction, but in the Australian rural situation where it appears children have greater contact with their fathers (Cambourne, 1971 a), the father's style of interaction with the child would also be very important.

PARENT–CENTRED OBJECTIVES OF SPAN PLAYGROUPS

1. To help parents become better teachers of their children through provision of the opportunity to discuss the Pre-School Correspondence Program and all aspects of child development with other parents at SPAN sessions.
2. To promote parents' understanding of their own child through observing children interacting with other children and adults during play activities.
3. To promote parents' provision of stimulating and educational experiences for their child in the home through co-operative involvement with other parents to provide activities for their children at SPAN play sessions.
4. To foster enthusiasm for teaching in parents and create a more comfortable parent-educator/child relationship on which to base future correspondence education.

A FURTHER STRATEGY – WORKSHOPS FOR PARENTS

A further strategy being investigated by the Queensland Education Department is a series of workshops for parents aiming to increase skills required by parents to form and run a SPAN playgroup.

Such workshops would be designed to promote in parents an understanding of the child as an individual and member of a group, through practical sessions dealing with the major areas of children's activities, and how to interact verbally with the child to facilitate his language development. Knowledge gained by parents could then be used by them to develop and structure their SPAN play sessions, and it is felt that such a workshop experience would greatly benefit parents in the performance of this task.

During a SPAN Parent Workshop emphasis should be placed on the fact that parents of children from isolated areas are of necessity their children's educators; it is anticipated that the facilitation of parents' performance of this role would be enhanced by extensive provision of information on and practice at the many activities children engage in, during a Parent Workshop. The greater knowledge of activities and child development gained by parents through a workshop should not only enable them to provide activities for children during SPAN sessions, but also enable them to enrich their relationshiop with their child in the home, through increased understanding of his need for stimulating activity, and development of their ability to provide for these needs.

A Parent Workshop to increase parents' skills in forming and running a SPAN playgroup could explore the following training objectives:

1. To encourage parents to form SPAN groups based on knowledge that:
   - interaction with age peers stimulates all aspects of the development of children.
   - group play for four to five year old children will complement the Pre-School Correspondence Program and supplement home experiences for younger children.
   - parent discussion and interaction with children at SPAN sessions will aid parents in their role as teachers.
2. To enable parents to set up and run a SPAN Play session in co-operation with other parents, through the provision of:
   - learning experiences important to the child's future education.
   - activities and materials suited to the child's interests and stage of development.
3. To promote parents' skills in guiding young children and sharing these with other parents, such skills to include:
   - guiding play in group and individual situations.
   - promoting language development (including listening, speaking and understanding), concept formation, perceptual skills (visual, tactile and auditory discrimination) and problem solving, through verbal interaction with the child and provision of suitable activities.
4. To promote parents' knowledge and use of available resources:
   - Pre-School Branch, including Correspondence Unit
   - commercial sources
   - their own environments
   - SPAN Parent Resource Library.
5. To enable parents to serve as a resource for other parents forming SPAN groups through:
   - assisting parents to make use of program books, audio tapes and other resources, including those provided by the Pre-School Branch.
   - demonstrating materials and activities for children.

CONCLUSION

If during SPAN play sessions parents can provide a relatively unstructured setting where the child is free to choose from a wide range of stimulating activities, with equipment and materials available to encourage all forms of group and solitary play, including creative and sociodramatic play, the child will derive maximum benefit from the social experience encountered in the SPAN play session. In addition, the availability of supportive adults to encourage, explain and listen, will not only extend the child's interests and knowledge, but also his verbal ability, preparing him for the challenges of school and of life as an adult, either in a rural or urban setting.

The need therefore arises for three specific actions. First, a training program for parents along the lines indicated above, is needed. Such a training program should set limited objectives and aim at the development of specific practical skills. Second, a resource library of materials that can be utilised by parents in setting up and operating SPAN groups should be developed. These materials will need to be specially chosen with the needs of parents living in the remote and more isolated parts of the State in mind. Third, teachers at the Pre-School Correspondence Unit will need to support in practical ways the activities of parents in operating SPAN groups. In particular, teachers will need to be sensitive to what represents realistic objectives for such groups and what kinds of activities might be most valuable for children and parents.

Given these three requirements there would seem to be a strong possibility that SPAN groups could form an effective, family orientated, pre-school service which would promote the general and educational well-being of young children living in the more remote areas of Queensland.

END NOTES

1 Almy quotes from Erikson, E.H., *Identity and the Life Cycle,* New York, International Universities Press, 1959.

2 *The Program in Action* available from the Pre-School Correspondence Unit, College Road, Brisbane.

3 Australian Advisory Committee for Research and Development in Education grant made to Barry McGaw and Gerald Ashby for the first year of a proposed two year study, the *Evaluation of Pre-School Services for Geographically Isolated Children in Queensland.*

4 Personal communication from teachers at the Queensland Pre-School Correspondence Unit, based on their communication with parents of children on Pre-School Correspondence, 1975.

5 In this study, the children of parents from European countries where from an early the child is directly taught by the adults of his immediate environment to collect scattered facts and interrelate them into concepts, and utilise them in problem solving.

6 In this study, the children of parents from Middle Eastern and North African countries, where the child is left alone to form his concepts accidentally, and to test their relevance to his problems.

7 Context-bound speech more typical of working class children.

8 Those people showing less context-bound and more universalistic speech.

9 Perceptual role-taking ability can be defined as 'the ability to take another's visual perspective'.

10 Conceptual role-taking ability can be defined as 'the ability to take another's mental perspective'. (Selman, 1971, p.1722)

11 Conference proceedings in press.

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The evaluation of the Queensland Pre-School Correspondence Program was supported in part by a grant by the Australian Education Research and Development Committee, Canberra.

This particular report was supported in part by a grant provided by the former Australian Government Children's Commission, Canberra (now the Office of Child Care).

The evaluation also forms part of the two year international program of studies in early childhood education under the auspices of the Centre for Educational Research and Innovation (CERI) of the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), Paris.